



Bureau of Land Management – Critical Incident Stress Management Program

Death, Loss and Survivorship

Some critical incidents involve a personal loss. Individuals experience personal loss upon the death of someone known to them, such as a family member, friend, acquaintance, peer, or other co-worker. Interestingly, some people may experience similar feelings upon the death of those previously unknown to them such as an air tanker pilot, hotshot crew member, or other person who shares the same job and the culture of wildland fire.

Summary of issues involved in death, loss, and survivorship:

1. **Learning of the death.** Shock and denial are common initial responses to death, especially if the death is sudden and unexpected. Disbelief and confusion are frequently experienced.
2. **Reactions to death.** Many factors influence how intensely we feel the loss. Among these are the nature of attachment, spiritual views, the age of the deceased, how the person died, the similarity of the deceased to those we love, and the extent of the void that the person's absence leaves in our life. The death of another can also trigger our own fears of death and memories of previous traumatic events or losses.
3. **Grief and mourning.** Grieving takes time. This is important to remember because American culture is not readily accepting of lengthy grieving or mourning periods. Instead, there is the idea that a person needs to put the loss behind them and get on with life. There is no correct way to grieve. People deal with loss in different ways for different periods of time. The public expression of grief is mourning.
4. **Coping with loss.** It is common to experience powerful emotions. Confront emotions openly. Strong emotion may feel overwhelming. Breathe through it.
5. **Specific reactions to loss.** There are many possible reactions to loss. Common and normal reactions include sadness, crying, and numbness, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, fatigue, anger and frustration, finding it difficult to be alone, or wanting to be alone. Utilizing your support system is the best way to deal with the pain of grieving.
6. **Stages of grief.** Many clinicians have identified what they refer to as stages of grief. Although such stages differ in terminology, the basic structure of the stages involve (1) an initial shock and denial, (2) a subsequent impact and suffering period, followed by (3) some adjustment and degree of recovery (similar to exposure to any traumatic event). However, grieving is a complex process; it does not progress clearly from one stage to another. It is normal to once again have feelings long thought to have disappeared.
7. **Healing.** Acknowledge and accept your feelings. You may experience seemingly contradictory feelings such as relief and sadness (for example, relief that a burden of care or the person's suffering has ended, and sadness due to the loss). This is normal. Keep in mind that your emotional attachment does not end upon the death of someone you care about. Remember, bereavement is the normal process by which human beings heal from loss.
8. **Surviving the loss.** Surviving the death of someone you care about involves honoring the memory of the person by acknowledging what the person contributed to your life. From here, you can further honor the person by reengaging life. It is important to remember that similar feelings can follow the death or loss of pets, non-pet animals, and even plants and inanimate objects that have acquired some special meaning (like losing a family heirloom). Brain studies show that the same neural pathways of grief are activated regardless of the loss.